

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTI #1209/01 3311717
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 271717Z NOV 06 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5116
INFO RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 3032
RUEHBW/AMEMBASSY BELGRADE 2839
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 0693
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 5413
RUEHVJ/AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO 0537
RUEHSQ/AMEMBASSY SKOPJE 4243
RUEHVI/AMEMBASSY VIENNA 2820
RUEHVB/AMEMBASSY ZAGREB 3056
RUEPGBA/CDR USEUCOM INTEL VAIHINGEN GE
RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE
RHDLCNE/COMUSNAVEUR LONDON UK
RUFNPKB/COMUSNAVEUR POLAD NAPLES IT
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHNW/DIR DTSP0 WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEHPS/USOFFICE PRISTINA 3536

C O N F I D E N T I A L TIRANA 001209

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/SCE (EKOTHIEMER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [KIRF](#) [AL](#)
SUBJECT: IMPASSE ENDS AFTER ISLAMIC COUNCIL VOTES TO
DISMISS SHKODRA MUFTI

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARCIE RIES FOR REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. After losing a vote of confidence in a meeting of the National Islamic Council on November 25, Bashkim Bajraktari, the Mufti of Shkoder, agreed to step down. His resignation ended a weeklong impasse during which Bajraktari, who had been fired earlier in the week by Selim Muca, head of the Albanian Islamic Community (AMC), refused to vacate the muftini headquarters or to relinquish control. Bajraktari and Muca have been at loggerheads over several issues in the past year, but, in the end, it was a dispute over the development of AMC property that precipitated the mufti,s firing. A new mufti, Ndricim Sulejmani, has been named to replace Bajraktari. Preliminary reports suggest that Sulejmani is theologically more moderate than Bajraktari. END SUMMARY.

TROUBLESOME SHKODER MUFTI REPLACED

12. (SBU) Following numerous disputes with the leadership of the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), on November 15 the AMC took the unusual step of dismissing the controversial Mufti of Shkoder, Bashkim Bajraktari. Over the past year, Bajraktari has gained notoriety and come into conflict with both the leadership of the AMC and the City of Shkoder when he publicly opposed the construction of a statue of Mother Theresa in Shkoder,s central square. The mufti also opposed the reconstruction of a church-mosque structure within the confines of the Rozafa Palace, overlooking the city, a project that was to be undertaken with support from the Ambassador,s Fund for Cultural Preservation.

13. (C) According to Saimir Rusheku, Deputy Director of the AMC, there were three formal reasons for Bajraktari,s dismissal: poor management of community property and resources; allowing foreign influences access to himself and

to the local Islamic Council; and, public insubordination and blatant disregard for directives from the AMC. Rusheku also added that Bajraktari is a villager and lacks the necessary intellectual skills and theological training to be a mufti.

14. (SBU) On November 16, one day following Bajraktari,s dismissal, Muca appointed Ndricim Sulejmani, the imam of one of Shkoder,s largest mosques, to be the new mufti. Bajraktari refused to vacate the muftini premises, however, and instead launched a weeklong public relations campaign to muster support for his continued service as mufti. He held a press conference during which he claimed that, at the urging of the nine-member local Islamic Council of Shkoder, he would not relinquish his position. Bajraktari,s efforts culminated in a quickly organized inauguration ceremony for a new mosque on November 24, during which he circulated a petition calling for the dismissal of Selim Muca as head of the AMC.

15. (SBU) Saimir Rusheku, Deputy Director of the AMC, told us that all mosques, administrative buildings, and other lands are the property of the AMC. Furthermore, all salaries, including that of the Shkoder Mufti, are paid directly by the AMC. Thus, according to Rusheku, local Islamic Councils serve only in an advisory capacity and have no legal authority over either the property or personnel of the individual muftinis. Rusheku pointed out, however, that Shkoder is one of only four self-financed muftinis, which gives it a certain degree of autonomy.

SHKODRA COUNCIL STACKED WITH EXTREMISTS

16. (C) Rusheku said that two closely allied Islamic

organizations heavily influence Bajraktari and the Shkoder Islamic Council. The Albanian Muslim Forum (AMF), headed by Ferit Hafizi, is a group that has been openly hostile to the AMC leadership and regularly issues anti-American statements. (NOTE: Embassy sources indicate that Olsi Jaxeshi is the behind-the-scenes leader of the AMF. END NOTE) The other organization is the Muslim Brotherhood, an extremist organization with roots in the Middle East. According to Rusheku, the Muslim Brotherhood is represented by Arben Halluni, who is frequently referred to as the &Deputy Mufti8 despite the fact that such a position does not officially exist and Halluni is not on the AMC payroll.

17. (SBU) According to Rasim Hasanaj, head of the State Committee on Cults (SCC), under the by-laws of the AMC its leadership has the authority to dismiss a mufti and, if the mufti objects, an appeal may be brought to the National Islamic Council. On November 25, during a regularly scheduled meeting of the Council, a secret vote was conducted. According to media reports, after losing the vote, Bajraktari shook hands with Sulejmani and accepted his defeat. Media have reported that Bajraktari has been offered the position of imam of a prominent mosque in Shkoder.

PROPERTY AT THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

18. (SBU) Though the AMC leadership and Bajraktari have been at loggerheads over a number of issues in the past, in the end, it was a dispute over the development of a large parcel of land in the center of Shkoder, referred to as Zadrake, that precipitated Bajraktari,s dismissal. According to Rusheku, the AMC and the City of Shkoder have been after Bajraktari for years to develop Zadrake. Because the Muftini of Shkoder is financially self sufficient, most of the proceeds would accrue to the national organization.

19. (C) Both sides have accused the other of manipulating public perception to obfuscate the fact that each is seeking personal gain. Whereas Bajraktari had been negotiating with a Middle Eastern company to construct a commercial center, the AMC had been negotiating with a construction firm to erect apartment buildings. Initially, Rusheku said that such revenue would be used to finance the restitution procedures

for thousands of other properties to which the AMC has claim all across Albania. Rusheku later intimated that his boss, Muca, and Bajraktari, were competing for personal enrichment from Zadrale and that neither one had noble theological interests at heart.

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM ON THE FRINGES OF THE DISPUTE

¶10. (C) SCC Head Hasanaj said that the by-laws of the AMC state that the Islamic tradition in Albania is that of Hanafism, which was introduced during the Ottoman period. Hasanaj said that Hanafism is a moderate strain of Islam and that all AMC-affiliated muftis and imams must sign an agreement to respect this rite and tradition. Hasanaj said that Hanafism is in competition with the more fundamentalist current of Islam, Salafism, which is gaining ground in Albania through foreign influences. Hasanaj said that despite officially being Hanafist, there are many imams and mosques that abide by this in name only and are, in fact, following the Salafist tradition.

¶11. (C) According to Rusheku, though Bajraktari himself may not be a Salafist, he is allowing this movement to gain ground in the Shkoder region. In contrast to Hasanaj, Rusheku said that though the AMC is officially Hanafist, it

was not, per se, opposed to Salafism. He said that where the AMC leadership and the GOA draw the line, however, is the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Rusheku, this movement seeks political and not just theological influence. Rusheku intimated that, in addition to the dispute over property management, it was Bajraktari,s giving license to extremists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, to gain ground in Shkoder that precipitated his removal.

NEW MUFTI: A MODERATE LOYAL TO THE AMC

¶12. (C) The new mufti of Shkoder is Ndrecim Sulejmani, formerly the imam of the Abu Bekr mosque, a large new mosque in the heart of the city. According to Rusheku, Sulejmani went to Syria in the early 1990s and studied theology in the Hanafist tradition. Rusheku said that while Sulejmani may not be a gifted Islamic scholar, unlike Bajraktari he does possess the necessary intellectual skills and theological training to serve as a mufti. Moreover, Sulejmani is a moderate who is expected to be loyal to Muca.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The biggest issues facing Albania,s religious communities are the return of property seized during the Communist regime. Once among the largest landholders in country, the AMC has regained only a small portion of its former holdings. Since the fall of Communism in the early 1990s, the lure of quick personal enrichment from these properties has drawn many people to the organization, including many of its leaders. The dismissal of Bajraktari as the mufti of Shkoder demonstrates that the battle for control of assets plays a greater role in the day-to-day operations of the AMC than the battle for Islamic faith. The danger is that while greed and corruption sew confusion and distract the attention of the leadership, extremist influences are able to gain a foothold. END COMMENT.

RIES